

Utopia and Apocalypse

Political Philosophy and American TV Series

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American television series are industrial products concerned predominantly with constructing audiences and selling them to advertisers. There was a time when to get to the biggest audiences they could, producers did aim for the lowest common denominator and this gave substance to the accusation that TV was "dumbing down" intellectual life. (That does raise the question of when exactly was TV involved in raising intellectual standards). But now, with more channels and competition between free-to-air, cable and the internet, producers are looking for niche audiences, particularly in the A/B socio-economic groups that they can rust on. In this context, it is not surprising more and more of these supposedly "dumb" cultural products seek to connect with those niche audiences at deep levels and thus raise unexpected philosophical questions.

"Don't ever tell John Locke what he can't do" is a recurring message in *Lost*, a program where survivors of a plane crash land on an idyllic island, with a ready supply of food and water, but all too soon they come under the threat of "the others" who turn out to be the remnants of a 1970s utopian social experiment that was also a scientific experiment to tap an inexhaustible energy source. The result of that experiment is that if a particular button is not pressed regularly, then the world will end.

"Save the cheerleader, save the world" is an exhortation during the first season of *Heroes* that manages to mix the mundane and the cosmic. This program concerns the fate of a group of superheroes who turn out to be the victims of an out of control genetic experiment to remake humanity with top level political support. The production of heroes has also produced some remarkable villains bent on destroying the planet.

These two programs have generated multiple series that return again and again to raise questions about the nature of the individual, the nature of the world, the possibility of utopia and the pursuit of utopia's propensity to generate apocalypse. These traditional philosophical questions continue to thrust their way into public discourse, even as it is supposedly dumbed down.

Just a quick note on methodology. How do we approach research into something as large and ephemeral as TV series? I came to these particular programs as a voyeur to see what interested my teenage son. I stayed as a flaneur, cruising these cultural products for the political insights they offer. And now I am some sort of a fan.

One approach to these issues is suggested by Theodor Adorno's complaint in critiquing Walter Benjamin's Arcades Project: "your study is located at the crossroads of magic and positivism" (Adorno and Benjamin 1999). Benjamin's response embraces Adorno's magic and positivism critique: "One thing is quite certain: what the constructive moment means for this book must be compared with what the philosopher's stone means for alchemy." This compares interestingly to Rorty's position in *Truth and Progress*: "In short, my strategy for escaping the self-referential difficulties into which "the Relativist" keeps getting himself is to move everything over from epistemology and metaphysics into cultural politics, from claims to knowledge and appeals to self-evidence to suggestions about what we should try." (TP 57) In my former life in rock and roll, we would translate that as "She'll be right on the night". My methodology utilises a constantly evolving materialist historiography, joining quantitative and qualitative methods with administrative and critical approaches to study the ethnographic ephemera of everyday life in order to spot hints about the new ways we are.

Recent developments in American series television have their antecedents in *Star Trek*: a science fiction television series created and driven by Gene Roddenberry through 80 episodes from 1966 to 1969. It has a distinctly philosophical focus with many episodes exploring metaphysical issues such as the nature of time and reality, personal identity and free will (Wetzel n.d.) and other episodes reflecting on the interaction between ethics and politics in topics such as altruism and authoritarianism, idealism and imperialism (Barad and Robertson, 2000). The new worlds encountered often proffer the possibility of utopia only for their true dystopian natures or the advent of an apocalypse to be revealed until the intervention of the *Star Trek* crew, themselves paragons of inter-racial harmony and liberal forbearance, provide the inhabitants of other worlds with new paths to perfectibility (Schubert 1997) *Dr Who* from the United Kingdom covers similar territory on an even cheaper budget. After *Star Trek* was cancelled in the late 60s, re-runs created a strong fan base that generated sufficient enthusiasm to support a further six series and ten motion pictures. *Star Trek* has become an enduring franchise seen as best practice in the entertainment industry but also a discontinuous discourse on philosophy.

It was not until the early 90s that we saw series TV do something as challenging as *Star Trek* – David Lynch's *Twin Peaks*. *The X-Files* (1993-2002), a sci-fi series featuring two FBI agents exploring paranormal events. Running for nine seasons, the program was created for the Fox network by Chris Carter. Carter maintained close control over the project with executive producer and writing credits on all but one of the 202 episodes. He set the parameters of the program as "fiction that takes place within the realm of extreme possibility." (Goldstein 1993) One FBI agent (Fox Mulder) is a grudging believer in the paranormal while the other (Dana Scully) has a healthy scientific scepticism. This contrast sets off a lively debate about perception and proof, radical empiricism against the scientific method that underlines the irony of the show's tagline: "The Truth Is Out There". The unrequited sexual tension between the

main characters and the consequences of their own family histories contribute to the appeal of the program but the sustaining intellectual interest is from the weekly exploration of complex scientific, philosophical and political issues. Initially, the stand-alone story-lines investigated a range of paranormal and supernatural activities in so-called “monster of the week” episodes that nevertheless raised a variety of scientific and philosophical concerns: the strange effects of minds at the edge of reality, intentionality of artificial intelligence in “the Ghost in the Machine”, the bioethics of cloning in “Eve” and the limits of humanity explored by the mutant, Eugene Tooms. Carter also sows a few clues of governmental connivance to disguise the presence of aliens and by the second season, the “mythology” arc begins to be fully developed so the series mixed stand alone episodes with what was effectively an inter-laced mini-series based around a full-blown conspiracy to construct an alternative reality to cover up government assistance for an alien take-over of the planet. This story arc, based in the government-FBI milieu, draws out a number of themes that are (or should be) central to contemporary political philosophy: governmentality (how governments produce citizens conducive to being efficiently governed); bio-politics (the use of bodies and life as political collateral or weapons); the simulacra (where the sign displaces the real, particularly in political discourse); paranoia (as a political condition) and other post-modern preoccupations. Mulder and Scully are constantly manipulated from confronting the conspiracy which is only subverted with the assistance of alien rebels in “bodies without organs” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). *X-Files* raised the bar for American television series and showed that a program about ideas could flourish.

The monster of the week element of *X-Files* was reworked in a number of programs with super-natural themes: Joss Whedon’s *Buffy, the Vampire-Slayer* (1997-2003) and Constance Burge’s *Charmed* (1998-2006) both featured young heroines in the midst of an absolute dystopia of vampires, demons and an encroaching underworld. Buffy’s post-feminism has been the subject of much academic discussion (Kaveney 2004, Jowett 2005, Wilcox 2005) but both Buffy Summers and the Charmed Sisters Three were central characters in story arcs where they confronted philosophical issues such as category confusion, perceptual perversion and corruption of the time-space continuum. They responded with a reflective approach to dealing with a world on engulfing horror, constructing and adapting belief systems to fit the real world as new, threatening facts come to light. Most recently, *Supernatural* (2005-present) has filled the demon of the week slot with a realist gloss in a mythological arc through the demon hunter underground where ethical questions of the relative good in a world of evil constantly bubble to the surface, mirroring the search for ethical independence in a world with an enforced war on terror where you are only allowed just one way to win.

X-Files revitalization of science fiction left the ground open to a resurgence of space opera: traditional soap opera in *Battlestar Galactica* (new series 2003-); more feisty fare with post-modern inflections like Joss Whedon’s *Firefly* (2002); and the most sprawling space opera since *Star Trek* itself, *Stargate SG1* (1997-2007). The recent series of *Battlestar Galactica* is based on a 1978 series of the same name but it has been systematically reworked for this series. Human space colonies are attacked by their own robots who were exiled to deep space. The robots, or cylons, all but wipe out humanity and a long chase ensues as the military spaceship, *Battlestar Galactica* attracts around it a fleet of ships that were in space when the cylons attacked and so

contain most human survivors. There is an attempt at democratic government within the fleet as the people search for Earth assisted by old prophecies from a polytheistic religion that contrasts with the cylon's monotheism. The story line provides the opportunity to explore the distance between humans and the cylons. While the humans are constantly endangered by their own hubris, they are saved by their intuitions while the relentless logic of the cylons leads them to their own contradictions and divisions. The series also confronts issues of governance in times of warfare, the breadth of presidential prerogative and the utility and acceptability of torture.

Based on the 1994 movie *Stargate*, the TV series features US agents using an alien portal (last utilized in Egyptian times) to travel cosmic distances to gather technology useful in developing military applications. Earlier seasons involved interaction with various aliens who are known on earth as gods (Anubis, Baal, Thor but never Jehovah) and were concerned with the process of "ascension" where mortals move to higher planes of being. Since 9/11 there has been a greater focus on saving the world from invasion threats, particularly those led by prophets of the false religion of the Ori. The character of Colonel Jack O'Neil encapsulates many of the contradictions of the contemporary United States: he is well-armed and aggressive but convinced of his own positive influence; he is fearful and suspicious of others while ostensibly embracing difference; and while he attempts to ensure that each of his actions creates no harm, he constantly produces bigger crises. The show may be read as a striking critique of the Iraqi intervention while at the same time being supportive of the military machine on the ground. One gets the feeling that each week as the SG1 team prepares to cross the galaxy to confront a new form of evil dedicated to controlling the universe, they are kicking around the same questions as their compatriots climbing into an armoured personnel carrier for a spin around the streets of Baghdad. In the mix, a number of pertinent philosophical and political questions are posed about the dangers of intervention, the permissibility of extraordinary behaviour in extraordinary conditions and the inability of good intentions to produce good outcomes that leads, among many other things, to the fallibility of all utopias. In *Stargate SG1* mundane political considerations interact with cosmic concerns about the nature of the time-space continuum, issues of free will and determinism and the limits of humanity in an alien universe where torture, apocalypse and human extinction are constant threats.

The confrontation with contemporary politics in *Battlestar Galactica* and *Stargate SG1* is much more explicit in two American television series that pick up *X-Files*' preoccupation with the inner workings of the Washington political system and move off in a much more realist direction. The mundane presidential politics of Aaron Sorkin's *West Wing* (1999-2006) and *24* (2001-present) reveal a hotbed of ethical indecision that rests in the constitutional vagueness about the role of the president. Many critics have read the exercise of presidential powers outside the bounds of congressional control (allowing assassinations and torture) in these programs as exculpatory but at least these questions were being raised while the mainstream news media remained mute on issues that go to the heart of political legitimacy. *24* uses reality TV conventions of real-time plot, split screen exposition, unexpected interventions and a close focus on personal emotions to explore the interactions between a US President and an officer in the Counter Terrorism Unit. The CTU officer does not hesitate to summarily behead a criminal or kill a colleague for operational purposes and the president takes only a little longer to begin torturing

recalcitrant members of his own staff. Similarly, the president in *West Wing* orders the extra-judicial death of a Middle East player suspected of terrorist connections.

Two half hour program based series *Entourage* (2004-present) and *Californication* (2007-present) bend the ethical lens to look back at Hollywood's own production ethos to appreciate that behind the expensive, exploitative spectacle is the loss of human nerve in pursuit of the deal. It is significant that in both these programs artists with high hopes are brought low by their own agents' hapless lack of ethical awareness prompted by their constant confusion of meaning a la Socrates versus the Sophists.

Finally, two still unfolding series, *Lost* and *Heroes* where multi cultural and cross class casts provide a thorough-going exploration of how projects of ameliorisation so quickly descend into corruption that threatens humanity. They recognize the integration of science, business and politics which goes a long way to explaining the intractability of bio-political problems – environmental, health and genetic. These programs already assume a globalised world where the butterfly effect is in full force – a small chance at one point produces massive change somewhere else.

The pursuit of utopia produces its own apocalypse.